

PRE-SCHOOL TEACHER CANDIDATES' BELIEFS AND CONDITIONED JUDGMENTS REGARDING CHILDREN'S BODY IMAGE

By

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to identify pre-school teacher candidates' beliefs and conditioned judgments regarding children's body image. The exploratory research pattern was used in this study. The sample group included final year B.A. students from the Pre-School Education departments in two state universities in Izmir. The qualitative part of the study was conducted using seven volunteer students, while the quantitative part was conducted using 87 students from both universities. An interview form and a questionnaire were developed by the researchers. Judging by the results of the study it was seen that teacher candidates perceived figures of skinny and fat children in a negative light when compared to figures of normal children. Support should be given to teacher candidates to accept different body forms and that this would not only be important in preventing conditioned judgments, but it would also have a positive effect on the class atmosphere.

Keywords: Body Image, Stigmatization, Preschool, Preschool Teacher, Perception of Body.

INTRODUCTION

It is known that prejudice towards overweight individuals has increased together with the increase in obesity problems. A rise in obesity has been observed in Turkish society as a result of the easy access to sources of nutrition that accompanied the rise in prosperity plus comfort eating to ease anxiety and depression (Ata et al., 2014). Obesity can arise due to many physical, psychological, hereditary, and nutritional problems (TÜİK, 2013). It is stated that feeding habits acquired during early childhood are maintained during adulthood given that predilections for unhealthy eating are underpinned by habits acquired during the first years of life. Of considerable importance is the way that certain unhealthy eating behaviors are established as a result of some parents overfeeding their children equating being plump with being healthy. Individuals raised in environments where the family decides how much a child needs to eat and insists on the child eating too much tend to comfort eat as teenagers and

adults when under stress (Eliassen, 2011).

The negative body image generated by obesity leads to an increase in psychological disorders and a drop in self-esteem as unhealthy and irregular eating habits are continued (Sagone and Caroli, 2013). Obese individuals generally exhibit such compulsive behavioral disorders as biting their nails, sucking their thumbs, and pulling out their hair (O'Brien et al., 2013). Negative conditioned judgments with respect to obese people are commonplace in society with obese individuals being subjected to various prejudices and discrimination at school and in the workplace (Jayasuriya, 2014).

When the studies in the literature are examined it can be seen that individuals possess negative attitudes towards overweight, obese or extremely thin adults, and even children (Richardson et al., 1961; Cramer and Steinwert, 1998; Morrisson and O'Connor, 1999; Frankova and Chudobová 2000; Tiggemann and Anesbury, 2000).

It has been determined that pre-school children generally

choose thin children or those of normal weight as play friends over fat (bellied) children. In a survey conducted with pre-school children when normal, thin, and fat pictures of the same child were shown to the children, the children were noted to have used expressions of hatred for the fat figures and to have said they did not like fatness (Sagone and Caroli, 2013). Kornilaki (2014) reached similar conclusions in their study on how pre-school children perceive obesity and emphasized the importance of programs to break the conditioned judgments regarding obesity.

It is expressed in the literature that conditioned judgments with respect to body measurements particularly fatness start being formed in the pre-school years as a result of family, teachers, and media influence (Ricciardelli and McCabe, 2001; Cramer and Steinwert, 1998; Crandall, 1994).

When this phenomenon is examined from a pre-school perspective, it is important for the raising of healthy individuals that work is carried out to identify and prevent the prejudices and negative attitudes towards children held by those adults responsible for the care and education of children as institutions, where early childhood education is given. It is for this reason that the aim of this study was to determine the beliefs and conditioned judgments regarding children's body images held by pre-school teacher candidates.

The sub-problems are:

- How do teacher candidates perceive thin children?
- How do teacher candidates perceive fat children?
- How do teacher candidates perceive the body image of those children with destructive behavioral disorders?
- How do teacher candidates perceive the body image of those children who are well behaved?
- How are teacher candidates' conditioned judgments regarding body image translated into the education environment?

1. Methodology

1.1 The Research Model

In mixed method studies, both quantitative and qualitative data are used, so that the truth can be understood in a

universal and rich context. In this way data diversity or corroboration can be achieved, the method used is made more powerful and any method's weaknesses can be dismissed. Therefore, one mixed research method and the exploratory method was used in this study. Firstly, the qualitative section of the study was carried out and the quantitative section of the study was conducted according to the results obtained in this section (Aypay, 2015; Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2013). This pattern by which the researchers first gathered qualitative data and then used these findings to gather quantitative data is expressed in the literature as the exploratory pattern (Büyüköztürk et al., 2015).

1.2 Working Group

The study was carried out at the Pre-School Education Departments in two separate state universities in Izmir. The final year B.A. students at these universities made up the study's working group. The fact that final year B.A. students were about to complete the B.A. studies, taken in order to fashion them with the knowledge and skills pertaining to the teacher profession was an important criterion for them being chosen as the working group. The study's qualitative section was run using seven volunteers from both universities' pre-school education final year students, while the quantitative section was run using a total of 87 teacher candidates from both universities' final year students who were given the questionnaire that was developed as a result of the qualitative section (and excluding those students who participated in the qualitative section). A total of 100 teacher candidates from both universities were questioned by 23 questionnaires were not analyzed by the researchers due to data loss.

Of the participants 76 (87.4%) were female and 11 (12.6%) were male while 31 (35.6%) came from the first university and 56 (64.4%) came from the second university. 28 (32.2%) of the participants had graduated from a general high school, while 40 (46%) had graduated from a vocational high school, and 19 (21.8%) from a teachers' high school.

1.3 Data Collection Tools

1.3.1 Qualitative Data Collection Tool

During the first stage of the study, semi-structured individual

interviews were conducted. An interview form was created by the researchers by scanning the relevant literature. The interview form consists of two sections. The first section contains seven open-ended questions asked in order to reveal the participants' beliefs and conditioned judgments regarding children's body images. The second section contains two open-ended questions to be answered in response to sketches of thin and fat children and one example problem.

1.3.2 Quantitative Data Collection Tools

A questionnaire was developed by the researchers by making use of the results of the content analysis of the interview data. Support from the Graphics Education Department was given for the pictures of the figures used in the questionnaire. The questionnaire's columns contained figures of thin, normal, and fat boys and girls, while the rows contained positive and negative characteristics and metaphors. The draft questionnaire contained 31 positive characteristics and 31 negative ones as well as seven metaphors. After consulting with specialists, nine more points including three metaphors were added to the questionnaire. In its final form, the questionnaire consists of 71 points to be ticked separately for both girl and boy figures - 31 positive points, 30 negative points, and 10 metaphors.

1.4 Data Collection Process

1.4.1 Qualitative Data Collection Process

The purpose of the study was explained to teacher candidates studying at both universities and they were invited to participate as volunteers. Four volunteer participants from University A and three from University B were interviewed. In order to prevent data loss, notes were taken and audio recordings were made. A total of 121 minutes of interviews were made averaging 17 minutes and 29 seconds.

1.4.2 Quantitative Data Collection Process

Final year students from both universities were invited to participate in the study on a volunteer basis.

2. Data Analysis

2.1 Qualitative Data Analysis

The analysis of the data obtained in the study was made

using content analysis, a method frequently used in the qualitative method. The aim of content analysis is the integration of data using concepts and themes and to tabulate it in such a way so as to make it easier for the readers to understand (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2013). During the preparation phase of this process, transcripts were made of the data collected using audio recordings and a dataset was created. In order to prevent any ethical problems, the teacher candidates were labeled K1, K2 through K7. During the coding phase, the dataset was read out without interruption and a code list was created by labeling the significant data units in the dataset with suitable concepts and words. During the obtaining themes phase, the codes were reviewed by the researchers, who then debated which themes could be obtained by bringing together which codes. Data organization was carried out by associating every piece of data with the themes and codes that had been generated. During the interpretation and reporting of the data, the findings were defined and interpreted using appropriate quotes and by making descriptions.

2.2 Analysis of Qualitative Data

The analysis of the research data was made using the SPSS 18 data package, while the distribution of numbers and percentages were worked out by taking average scores. Expert opinion was sought for the interview form prepared by the researchers and this was followed by pilot interview with two teacher candidates. As a result of the pilot interviews, it was seen that the questions worked and explanatory questions and probes were then added. The data was noted down verbatim by the researchers during the interview. At the same time, an audio recording was also made with the permission of the participant. The answers given by two teacher candidates who asked not to be recorded received an "incomplete" note by the researchers during the interview. The data that was noted during the interview was shown to the participants and their comments were verified. During the analysis of the data, the codes and themes were formulated together by the two researchers. Later on the codes were presented for expert opinion and the necessary changes were made accordingly.

The questionnaire that was developed by the researchers

as a result of the analysis of the qualitative data was given the necessary corrections after consulting with three different experts. Before the qualitative data collection phase began, a trial run was made using six teacher candidates and it was seen that the material worked. The data obtained during all the trial runs included in the study were not analyzed.

When the data was turned into a report, the data was sorted out by linking the quantitative data to the findings obtained from the qualitative data.

3. The Findings

The participants' body mass indexes were calculated according to the Turkish Public Health Agency Adult Body Mass Index and it was determined that 12 (14.94%) of the teacher candidates were thin, 64 (73.56%) were normal, 9 (10.34%) were heavy, and 1 (1.15%) was fat (Table 1). Five of the teacher candidates considered themselves normal despite being thin, while one considered him/herself as overweight. Of those teacher candidates with normal body mass indexes four considered themselves thin, while seven thought themselves overweight. Six of the teacher candidates identified as overweight said they thought they were normal. The teacher candidate who was identified as being fat said he/she perceived him/herself as being overweight.

Of the 31 positive characteristics in the questionnaire, only eight were attributed to the figures of fat boys and five for the figures of fat girls. The five highest scoring characteristics are seen in Table 2. Of these characteristics, the highest score for the figure of a fat boy was 52 (59.8%) with

			Body Form			Total	
			Thin	Normal	Over weight	Fat	
Body Perception	Thin	No.	7	4	0	0	11
		%	63.6	36.4	0.0	0.0	100.0
	Normal	No.	5	53	6	0	64
		%	7.8	82.8	9.4	0.0	100.0
	Overweight	No.	1	7	3	1	12
		%	8.3	58.3	25.0	8.3	100.0
Total	No.	13	64	9	1	87	
	%	14.9	73.6	10.3	1.1	100.0	

Table 1. Distribution of the ways in which Pre-school Teacher Candidates Perceive Body Forms and their Own Bodies

	Positive Characteristics		Positive Characteristics		
	Boys		Girls		
	No.	%	No.	%	
Sensitive	52	59.8	Sensitive	48	55.2
Strong	50	57.5	Strong	48	55.2
Sweet	47	54.0	Sweet	44	50.6
Affable	45	51.7	Dreamer	36	41.4
Cheerful	43	49.4	Dominant	34	39.1

Table 2. Distribution of Positive Characteristics Attributed to Figures of Fat Boys and Girls

"Sensitive" while the highest score for the figure of a fat girl was shared jointly by "Sensitive" and "Strong" with 48 (55.2%) each. In addition to this the characteristics "Sweet", "Dreamer", and "Dominant" were attributed to the figure of a fat girl while it was determined that the characteristics "Sweet", "Affable", and "Cheerful" were attributed to the figure of a fat boy. The expressions used for fat children in the interviews upheld these findings.

"Fat children are in fact full of love. They are always complimenting others. That is generally the case. They can be careless. For example, they are always losing their pencils or they might demolish their friends' towers, but never on purpose, and they apologize afterwards" [K-2].

Of the 30 negative characteristics in the questionnaire, 22 were attributed to the figure of a fat boy while 22 were attributed to the figure of a fat girl. The top five are seen in Table 3. The highest scoring negative characteristic for both the fat boy and fat girl figures was "Slow" with 74 people (85.1%) and 69 people (79.3%), respectively. The teacher candidates attributed the negative characteristics "Sluggish", "Bashful", and "Left out" to the fat figures of both genders. When the top five negative characteristics are looked at, it can be seen that "Antisocial" was the lowest score for boys and "Unhappy" was the lowest score for girls with 51 people (58.6%) and 54 people (62.1%),

	Negative Characteristics		Negative Characteristics		
	Boys		Girls		
	No.	%	No.	%	
Slow	74	85.1	Slow	69	79.3
Sluggish	73	83.9	Left out	68	78.2
Bashful	66	75.9	Sluggish	66	75.9
Left out	58	66.7	Bashful	61	70.1
Antisocial	51	58.6	Unhappy	54	62.1

Table 3. Distribution of Negative Characteristics attributed to the Figures of Fat Boys and Girls

respectively. It was noted during the interviews that the teacher candidates used negative expressions when talking about fat children.

"If you ask me, the fat kid is the one who is left out in the class. They think that everything they say is going to be mocked. Generally they are good humored. They are not very social but they are sweet" [K-3].

"They are sluggish and they cannot move. They are a little unhappy, more retiring, they have trouble breathing and find it hard to keep up during activities; they are out of breath" [K-7].

Teacher candidates attributed four of the 10 metaphors in the questionnaire to the figures of fat boys and girls. The highest scoring metaphor for both fat boys and girls was "Balloon" with 76 people (84.7%) and 79 people (90.8%), respectively (Table 4). The other metaphors used for the figures of fat boys and girls were seen to be "Trash can", "Ice cream", and "Vacuum cleaner". During the interviews conducted as part of the qualitative part of the study the teacher candidates were asked, "If you were to make an analogy what would you liken fat children to? Why?" It was seen that all the participants used similar expressions.

"I would liken them to ice cream because ice cream is sweet and fat [tening]" [K-1].

"I would probably liken them to a balloon. That is the first thing that comes to mind. But this is to do with breath. I mean, I thought of a balloon because they have breathing problems. I could also liken them to vacuum cleaners. Just as a vacuum cleaner sucks everything up, so fat kids want to eat everything" [K-5].

Of the 31 positive characteristics in the questionnaire, 22 were attributed to the figure of a normal weight boy and 26 to the figure of a normal weight girl. The top five are seen in Table 5. The highest scoring characteristic for a normal

	Metaphors Boys		Metaphors Girls		
	No.	%	No.	%	
Balloon	76	84.7	Balloon	79	90.8
Trash Can	59	67.8	Trash Can	57	65.5
Ice Cream	49	56.3	Ice Cream	48	55.2
Vacuum Cleaner	46	52.9	Vacuum Cleaner	43	49.4

Table 4. Distribution of Metaphors attributed to the Figures of Fat Boys and Girls

	Positive Characteristics Boys		Positive Characteristics Girls		
	S	%	S	%	
	Confident	70	80.5	Clean	70
Orderly	66	75.9	Skillful	66	75.9
Tidy	65	74.7	Orderly	65	74.7
Happy	62	71.3	Tidy	64	73.6
Clean	61	70.1	Confident	63	72.4

Table 5. Distribution of Positive Characteristics attributed to Figures of Normal Boys and Girls

weight boy was "Confident" with 70 people (80.5%), while this same characteristic ranked 5th for a normal weight girl with 63 people (72.4%). The highest scoring characteristic for a normal weight girl was "Clean" with 70 people (80.5%), while this same characteristic was ranked 5th for a normal weight boy with 61 people (70.1%). The characteristics "Orderly" and "Tidy" were used for both child figures. In addition to these characteristics "Skilled" was attributed to boys with 66 people (75.9%) and "Happy" was attributed to girls with 62 people (71.3%).

Of the 30 negative characteristics in the questionnaire not one was attributed to the figure of a normal weight girl, while only one was attributed to the figure of a normal weight boy; this being "Dirty" with 60 people (69.0%). Of the 10 metaphors in the questionnaire, the term "Bee" was used by 39 people (44.8%) to describe a normal boy and by 40 people (46.0%) to describe a normal weight girl. During the interviews the teacher candidates were asked: "What kind of characteristics would you desire in a student if they were to represent your class and why?" the expressions used for the physical and behavioral characteristics expected of the student who would represent the class upheld the quantitative data.

"For one thing they have to be confident and their ability to express themselves has to be well developed. Apart from this they have to have a good relationship with their environment, with their friends and their teacher. So, this person should be a child with normal developmental characteristics, not overly developed or underdeveloped, but ideal" [K-4].

"Actually, I like children who are a bit more active. Thin children and fat children tend to be more introvert. Average children are more active, fit in well in the class, and when I

say, 'Come on kids, close your eyes and lie down' I mean I feel they can better express themselves as if they understand more what I am saying" [K-7].

Of the 31 positive characteristics in the questionnaire only one was attributed to the figure of a thin boy and a thin girl; the characteristic was "Active" with 61 people (70.1%) for boys and 58 people (66.7%) for girls. Of the 30 negative characteristics in the questionnaire the teacher candidates used only nine to describe both figures, the top five in each case are seen in Table 6. The highest scoring characteristic for the figure of a thin boy was the same as for the figure of a thin girl; the characteristic was "No appetite" with 75 people (86.2%) for boys and 76 people (87.4%) for girls. In addition to this the participants said they perceived both figures as "Weak", "Hyperactive", "Unruly", and "Stubborn". The expressions used for thin children in the interviews upheld these findings.

"They are children who are underweight for their height. They can have too little appetite, and are unwilling to eat, and these children tire easily. I think they participate in all activities. I have never observed thin children, behaviorally speaking" [K-1].

"If you ask me, a weak child. Children who are unwilling in class are generally weak. They are always moaning about something. They bargain with us. What if I do this, what if I do that? I mean a self-interest relationship. They are particularly fond of their mothers; I mean in my experience. They cry in order to eat. Their families also cause problems. They dote on them too much, likely because they do not eat" [K-3].

"I think they are more active; I mean that is what I have observed. They jump on almost everything" [K-4].

"When you say thin it means a lot below normal, their wrists are very thin, they have trouble moving. In fact, what comes to my mind is a very passive child whose ears are

sticking out and whose cheekbones are visible. They seem to me to be unhappy socially. They can be unwilling" [K-7].

"A child who is underweight compared to his or her peers. Their clothes are too baggy for them. I think they are weak, because they are thin; puny. They have self-confidence issues. In fact, because they are thin there can even be inadequacy issues. They strive to put on weight" [K-5].

Of the 10 metaphors in the questionnaire it can be seen that the same five were attributed to both the thin boy and thin girl figure. The highest scoring metaphor in both cases was "Stick" with 73 people (83.9%) and 74 people (85.1%) for the boy and the girl, respectively (Table 7). In addition, it was seen that the teacher candidates likened the figures of a thin boy and a thin girl to "a drinking straw", "a piece of string", "a twig", and a "cracker". During the qualitative section of the study the teacher candidates were asked, "What would you compare a thin child to and why?" It was seen that all the participants used similar expressions when asked for a metaphor to describe thin children.

"You know those salted pretzel sticks, right? Crackers. They look like they can break so easily. A child like a cracker." [K-1]

"A stick. Fragile. Delicate. If you squeeze too hard they will get away but if you don't they will remain free" [K-3].

"When you say a thin child I am thinking right now of a drinking straw for some reason. A straw. No body contours. Flat. No discernible lines" [K-7].

4. Discussion

It was determined that of the participants in this study in which pre-school teacher candidates' beliefs and conditioned judgments with respect to children's body images were examined, 13 (14.94%) were thin, 64 (73.56%) were of normal weight, nine (10.34%) were overweight, and one (1.15%) was fat. Five teacher

	Negative Characteristics		Negative Characteristics		
	Boys		Girls		
	No.	%	No.	%	
No appetite	75	86.2	No appetite	76	87.4
Weak	64	73.6	Hyperactive	64	73.6
Hyperactive	61	70.1	Weak	61	70.1
Unruly	59	67.8	Stubborn	55	63.2
Stubborn	57	65.5	Unruly	55	63.2

Table 6. Distribution of Negative Characteristics attributed to Figures of Thin Boys and Girls

	Metaphors		Metaphors		
	Boys		Girls		
	No.	%	No.	%	
Stick	74	85.1	Stick	75	86.2
Drinking straw	73	83.9	Drinking straw	74	85.1
String	70	80.5	Twig	71	81.6
Twig	70	80.5	String	69	79.3
Cracker	59	67.8	Cracker	60	69.0

Table 7. Distribution of Metaphors attributed to Figures of Thin Boys and Girls

candidates who were thin considered themselves to be of normal weight while one considered him/herself fat. Four of the participants having normal weight considered themselves to be thin while seven thought themselves overweight. Of those participants who were found to be overweight six teacher candidates said they considered themselves to be of normal weight. The teacher candidate who was found to be fat said he/she was overweight. Going by this it may be said that 24 of the teacher candidates perceived their own bodies differently (Table 1). In a study made by Ata et al. (2014) on body perception and obesity it was noted that some individuals do not correctly perceive their own bodies. In this study, which was conducted using adults, both men and women who were not obese perceived their bodies more correctly but it was seen that obese people tried to see themselves as thinner than they actually were (Ata et al., 2014). The fact that the fat teacher thought of him/herself as overweight while the overweight teacher candidates thought of themselves as being of normal weight shows that the findings in the study are consistent with those in the literature.

It was seen that the teacher candidates used only eight of the 31 positive characteristics given in the study to describe the figure of a fat boy, but 20 of the 30 negative characteristics. Similarly, they used only five of the positive characteristics and 22 of the negative ones for the figure of a fat girl. It is thought that the reason why more negative characteristics were used and fewer positive ones for the figure of a fat girl is due to the fact that 76 (87.4%) of the participants were women. In a study by Furnham et al. (2002) it was noted that together with increasing obesity problems particularly in Western societies, the ideal body image for women was portrayed as thin while the ideal body image for men was portrayed as muscular. In addition to the negative characteristics attributed to the figure of a fat boy, the figure of a fat girl was given the added characteristic "Dirty". This may be explained by the use of such terms as "greasy, diabetic, and sweaty" used by the teacher candidates in the interviews to describe the figures of fat children. In a study by Tiggemann and Anesbury (2000) to determine pre-school children's conditioned judgments of obese children, similar findings were noted. It was determined that the figures of boys and

girls of normal weight were perceived as friendly, happy, hard working, confident, and healthy to a larger degree than the figures of obese children. It was also noted that the figures of obese boys and girls were perceived as lazy more so than the figures of normal weight boys and girls (Tiggemann and Anesbury, 2000).

The teacher candidates used 22 of the 31 positive characteristics in the study to describe the figure of a normal weight boy and 26 of them to describe the figure of a normal weight girl. It was seen that none of the participants used any negative characteristics to describe a normal weight girl, while 60 participants (69.0%) used the negative characteristic "Dirty" to describe a normal weight boy. It is thought that the reason why the figure of a normal weight boy was given the characteristic "Dirty" could stem from the belief that in the culture it is the woman's job to tidy up the house, wash the dishes and the clothes, and that men are not supposed to do these chores. During the interviews when the teacher candidates were asked to describe the ideal characteristics for a pupil who was to represent the class they said they preferred children of normal weight with such behavioral characteristics as "enterprising, fitting in, enthusiastic, and willing". When the findings obtained in the quantitative section of the study are looked at it can be seen that the positive characteristics attributed to the figures of normal weight children are consistent with the adjectives expressed in the interviews.

In the study by Sagone and Caroli (2013) it was noted that obese children were negatively branded and were subjected to negative attitudes and behaviors. Indeed, although many negative characteristics were attributed to the figures of fat children in this study, in a similar fashion negative characteristics were attributed to the figures of thin children as well. It was determined that the teacher candidates indicated such negative characteristics as "No appetite", "Weak", "Hyperactive", and "Unruly" for the figures of thin children. In the interviews they stressed that thin children never ate anything at mealtimes, that they whined and complained and that they bargained with the teacher. The teacher candidates speculated that thin children have eating disorders, which is why their families behave with more interest toward them resulting in the children being "whiners" and "stubborn". Furthermore, the

negative opinions that the teacher candidates have of thin children suggest that this might stem from them having problems with these children when managing the class.

Conclusions and Recommendations

When the teacher candidates' perceptions of body builds and their own bodies are looked at it can be seen that they perceive themselves as being fatter or thinner than they actually are.

Judging by the study's results, it has been determined that teacher candidates give negative labels to fat and thin children in particular with respect to their physical appearance. It was also seen that the teacher candidates attributed many positive characteristics to the figures of fat children in addition to the negative ones, but that they did not perceive thin children in a positive light. Contrary to the literature, it was determined that they perceived thin children more negatively than they perceived fat children.

Given these findings it is thought that support should be given to the training of teacher candidates to respect differences and to accept different physical builds, and that such training would be important in the prevention of conditioned judgments. Furthermore, it is suggested that different aspects of this topic be examined through studies that observe the in-class behavior of teachers or teacher candidates with respect to children's body sizes.

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